



## NON-VERBATIM MINUTE

### DETAILS

<b>DATE:</b>	29/03/2022
<b>TIME:</b>	2-3pm
<b>METHOD:</b>	Zoom Meeting
<b>THEME:</b>	Digital skills and work: 'Level-Up Digital' – SMEs and Digital skills
<b>CHAIR:</b>	The Baroness Verma, Officer, Digital Skills APPG
<b>SPEAKERS:</b>	Ruth Edwards MP Bhavina Bharkhada, Head of Policy & Campaigns, Make UK Laurelle Darroux, Owner and Founder, Sleepgoddess Hana Glover, Owner and Founder, The Bead Shop (Nottingham)

### MINUTES

Baroness Verma opened the meeting and explained she was chairing it in the absence of Julie Elliott MP, who was indisposed with another commitment.

#### Ruth Edwards MP

In her remarks, Ms Edwards said there was a huge change to the world of work and the workforce, partly due to COVID and other supply chain issues. More companies had moved online amid a shift that had been accelerated by the pandemic.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution meant there would be huge disruption to the workforce with many other jobs disappearing but potentially hundreds of millions of new jobs being created.

The Government was committed to helping people reskill and retrain for this new world, including young people who were entering the workforce. This would also help businesses large and small.

She noted that the Chancellor wanted to see levels of vocational and technical qualifications rise and UK businesses spend more on training to match their European peers.

Ms Edwards said she would likely be interested in doing a degree apprenticeship instead of the traditional academic route.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Act would put employers in a central role in designing technical qualifications by 2030 and allowing people to access more flexible student finance by 2025.

Changes to the National Curriculum meant that computer science and coding were now including, alongside the development of new digital T-levels, including in digital support services and digital business services.

Ms Edwards said businesses should also be helped to train and adapt through the tax system including through better designing the Apprenticeship Levy to suit employer needs.

She highlighted the Help to Grow Digital scheme that would provide SMEs with a voucher to cover up to 50% of the cost of taking up new technology up to £5,000. The other strand of Help to Grow covered the cost management training courses for SMEs.

### **Laurelle Darroux**

Ms Darroux used her remarks to explain how her experiences in the Get Growing programme, Google and BT, had helped her grow her business, Sleepgoddess. Her product was an ethically driven product, which was vegan friendly, designed to help people get to sleep.

After explaining her background and how her business offering had developed with her need for digital skills becoming important during lockdown.

Ms Darroux had used YouTube to learn the skills to set-up her business, as well as webinars, mentoring and tools available from Google and BT. She praised the 1-2-1 mentoring offered by the former, which had helped her design the look and feel of her website.

Sleepgoddess had been able to use its website and social media account to build a following and to successfully launch in September 2020. Guidance from Google mentors had helped Ms Darroux to conduct a launch to her waiting list of customers.

Ms Darroux had successfully positioned the brand and was in a place where she could expand her catalogue of products without the help of grants and loans.

### **Hana Glover**

Ms Glover explained how the importance of e-commerce had grown over the two decades she had been running her business in Nottingham. She had begun selling her products online in 2002, which were wholesale beads and jewellery, as well as other kits.

The impact of the pandemic had meant Ms Glover had tuned into the online skills sessions offered by BT and Google. She had listened to the webinars as a way of boosting her digital skills, primarily in branding and social media to boost her business's e-commerce.

Ms Glover had also launched a virtual bead and craft group to bring customers together, as well as online workshops. She had also developed kits to a range of over 100 to broaden the appeal of her products and keep her customer base engaged.

She explained that the Government offered a lot of part-funding for courses, but many SME owners did not have time to do or did not think was a wise investment for their limited resources. There was often a lack of money to invest in training and skills, which meant free offerings were very important to SMEs.

### **Bhavina Bharkhada**

Ms Bharkhada said 80-85% of Make UK's membership were SMEs and the organisation had a tech hub training centre in Aston, Birmingham, which trained around 400 apprenticeships a year.

She explained that remote components like virtual meetings and commissioning had become commonplace in the manufacturing sector the first time. Many had already been on the journey to using digital technology.

Almost half of manufacturers surveyed by Make UK in 2021 had said they were reappraising their training strategies in to improve digital skills at levels 4, 5 and 6.

The ageing profile of the workforce in manufacturing meant that there was a need to reskill but also retain institutional knowledge.

Businesses and government should act for reform of the Apprenticeship Levy to ensure businesses could access more funds, especially SMEs. Government should also consider a digital skills account to open access to more skills, whereas the Lifelong Learning Entitlement would likely put older workers off taking it up because it was seen as a 'loan'.

The education system also needed to be adapted to ensure digital skills were viewed alongside English and Mathematics as core skills.

## Questions and Answers

In the Q&A session, Ms Edwards advocated making cyber-security and safety training more available as part of the National Curriculum. SMEs could also benefit from support offered from the National Cybersecurity Centre.

Baroness Verma asked what could be done to streamline the process of SMEs applying for grants and support.

Many people struggled to access grants and support and it was a fair challenge to make the application process easier, Ms Edwards said. She was open to hearing suggestions from Ms Darroux and Ms Glover about improving the process.

Ms Glover said she had used some government scheme like Kickstart, but they had been part-funded and Ms Darroux said she had not accessed any government support to date. She indicated she was opened to doing so.

Ms Bharkhada said 60% of manufacturing businesses surveyed by Make UK had not heard of government support.

Baroness Verma challenged the Government to produce a clearer communications plan for highlighting the available support packages, whilst Ms Edwards agreed there was a greater role for local government in highlighting support.